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GARRISON:

AN OUTLINE OF HIS LIFE

BY

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GARRISON.

WILLIAM LLOYD GARRISON, the founder and leader of the movement for the abolition of slavery in the United States of America, was born in Newburyport, Massachusetts, December 10, 1805. His parents were from the British Province of New Brunswick. The father, a sea-captain, went away from home when William was a child, and it is not known whether he died at sea or on the land. The mother is said to have been a woman of high character, charming in person, and eminent for piety. For her William had the deepest reverence, and he is supposed to have inherited from her the moral qualities that specially fitted him for his career. She was entirely dependent for the support of herself and children upon her labors as a nurse. She was able to give William but a meagre chance for acquiring an education, but he had a taste for books, and made the most of his limited opportu-

nities. She first set him to learn the trade of shoemaker, and, when she found this did not suit him, let him try his hand at cabinet-making. But the latter pleased him no better than the former. In October, 1818, however, when he was in his fourteenth year, he was made more than content by being indentured to Ephraim W. Allen, proprietor of "The Newburyport Herald," to learn the trade of a printer. He found in this occupation a happy stimulus to his literary taste and ambition, as well as some available opportunities for mental culture. He soon became an expert compositor, and after a time began to write anonymously for the "Herald." His communications won the commendation of the editor, who had not at first the slightest suspicion that he was the author. He also wrote for other papers with equal success. A series of political essays, written by him for the "Salisbury Gazette," was copied by a prominent Philadelphia journal, the editor of which attributed them to the Hon. Timothy Pickering, a distinguished statesman of Massachusetts. His skill as a printer won for him the position of foreman while his ability as a writer was so marked that the editor of the "Herald," when temporarily

called away from his post, left the paper in his charge.

The printing-office was for him, what it has been for many another poor boy, no mean substitute for the academy and the college. He was full of enthusiasm for liberty; the struggle of the Greeks to throw off the Turkish yoke enlisted his warmest sympathy, and at one time he seriously thought of entering the West Point Academy and fitting himself for a soldier's career. His apprenticeship ended with his minority in 1826, when he began the publication of a new paper, the "Free Press," in his native place. This paper was full of spirit and intellectual force, but Newburyport was a sleepy place and did not appreciate a periodical so fresh and free; and so the enterprise failed. Mr. Garrison then went to Boston, where, after working for a time as a journeyman printer, he became the editor of the "National Philanthropist," the first journal established in America to promote the cause of total abstinence from intoxicating liquors. His work in this paper was highly appreciated by the friends of temperance, but a change in the proprietorship led to his withdrawal before the end of a year. In 1828

he was induced to establish the "Journal of the Times" at Bennington, Vermont, to support the re-election to the Presidency of the United States of John Quincy Adams. The new paper, though attractive in many ways, and full of force and fire, was too far ahead of public sentiment on moral questions to win a large support. Whether or not it would have lived if he had continued to be its editor, it is impossible to say; but the time had come at last when he was to enter upon the work with which his name will be forever associated. In Boston he had met Benjamin Lundy, a Quaker philanthropist, who had been for years engaged in an effort to convince the people of the United States that they ought to do something to promote the abolition of slavery. Mr. Garrison had been deeply moved by Mr. Lundy's appeals, and after going to Vermont he showed the deepest interest in the slavery question. Mr. Lundy was then publishing in Baltimore a small monthly paper, entitled "Genius of Universal Emancipation," and he resolved to go to Bennington and invite Mr. Garrison to join him in the editorship. With this object in view he walked from Boston to Bennington, through the frost

and snow of a New England winter, a distance of 125 miles. His mission was successful. Mr. Garrison was deeply impressed by the good Quaker's zeal and devotion, and he resolved to join him and devote himself thereafter to the work of abolishing slavery.

In pursuance of this plan he went to Baltimore in the autumn of 1829, and thenceforth the "Genius" was published weekly, under the joint editorship of the two men. It was understood, however, that Mr. Garrison would do most of the editorial work, while Mr. Lundy would spend most of his time in lecturing and procuring subscribers. On one point the two editors differed radically, Lundy being the advocate of gradual, and Garrison the champion of immediate, emancipation. The former was possessed by the idea that the negroes, on being emancipated, must be colonized somewhere beyond the limits of the United States; the latter held that they should be emancipated on the soil of the country, with all the rights of freemen. In view of this difference it was agreed that each should speak on his own individual responsibility in the paper, appending his initial to each of his articles for the informa-

tion of the reader. It deserves mention here that Mr. Garrison was then in utter ignorance of the change previously wrought in the opinions of English abolitionists by Elizabeth Heyrick's pamphlet in favor of immediate, in distinction from gradual emancipation. The sinfulness of slavery being admitted, the duty of immediate emancipation to his clear ethical instinct was perfectly manifest. He saw that it would be idle to expose and denounce the evils of slavery, while responsibility for the system was placed upon former generations, and the duty of abolishing it transferred to an indefinite future. His demand for immediate emancipation fell like a tocsin upon the ears of slaveholders. For general talk about the evils of slavery they cared little, but this assertion that every slave was entitled to instant freedom filled them with alarm and roused them to anger, for they saw that, if the conscience of the nation were to respond to the proposition, the system must inevitably fall. The "Genius," now that it had become a vehicle for this dangerous doctrine, was a paper to be feared and intensely hated. Baltimore was then one of the centres of the domestic slave trade, and upon this traffic Mr. Garrison

heaped the strongest denunciations. A vessel owned in Newburyport having taken a cargo of slaves from Baltimore to New Orleans, he characterized the transaction as an act of "domestic piracy," and avowed his purpose to "cover with thick infamy" those engaged therein. He was thereupon prosecuted for libel by the owner of the vessel, fined in the sum of fifty dollars, mulcted in costs of court, and, in default of payment, committed to jail. His imprisonment created much excitement, and in some quarters, in spite of the pro-slavery spirit of the time, was a subject of indignant comment in public as well as private. The excitement was fed by the publication of two or three striking sonnets, instinct with the spirit of liberty, which Mr. Garrison inscribed on the walls of his cell. One of these, "Freedom of Mind," is remarkable for freshness of thought and terseness of expression, and will probably hold a permanent place in American literature.

John G. Whittier, the Quaker poet, interceded with Henry Clay to pay Mr. Garrison's fine and thus release him from prison. To the credit of the slaveholding statesman, it must be said that he responded favorably, but before he

had time for the requisite preliminaries, Mr. Arthur Tappan, a philanthropic merchant of New York, contributed the necessary sum and set the prisoner free after an incarceration of seven weeks. The partnership between Mr. Garrison and Mr. Lundy was then dissolved by mutual consent, and the former resolved to establish a paper of his own, in which, upon his sole responsibility, he could advocate the doctrine of immediate emancipation and oppose the scheme of African colonization. He was sure, after his experiences at Baltimore, that a movement against slavery resting upon any less radical foundation than this would be inefficacious. He first proposed to establish his paper at Washington, in the midst of slavery, but on returning to New England and observing the state of public opinion there, he came to the conclusion that little could be done at the South while the non-slaveholding North was lending her influence, through political, commercial, religious, and social channels, for the sustenance of slavery. He determined, therefore, to publish his paper in Boston, and, having issued his prospectus, set himself to the task of awakening an interest in the subject by means of lectures

in some of the principal cities and towns of the North. It was an up-hill work. Contempt for the negro and indifference to his wrongs were almost universal. In Boston, then a great cotton mart, he tried in vain to procure a church or vestry for the delivery of his lectures, and thereupon announced in one of the daily journals that if some suitable place was not promptly offered he would speak on the Common. A body of infidels proffered him the use of their small hall, and, no other place being accessible, he accepted it gratefully, and delivered therein three lectures, in which he unfolded his principles and plans. He visited, privately, many of the leading citizens of the city, statesmen, divines, and merchants, and besought them to take the lead in a national movement against slavery; but they all with one consent made excuse, some of them listening to his plea with manifest impatience. He was disappointed, but not disheartened. His conviction of the righteousness of his cause, of the evils and dangers of slavery, and of the absolute necessity of the contemplated movement, was intensified by opposition, and he resolved to go forward, trusting in God for success.

On the first of January, 1831, without a dollar of capital save in hand and brain, and without a single subscriber, he and his partner issued the first number of "The Liberator," avowing their "determination to print it as long as they could subsist on bread and water, or their hands obtain employment." Its motto was, "Our Country is the World—our Countrymen are Mankind;" and the editor, in his address to the public, uttered the words which have become memorable as embodying the whole purpose and spirit of his life:—"I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—and I will be heard." Help came but slowly. For many months Mr. Garrison, and his brave partner, Mr. Isaac Knapp, who died long before the end of the conflict, made their bed on the floor of the room, "dark, unfurnished and mean," in which they printed their paper, and where the Mayor of Boston, in compliance with the request of a distinguished magistrate of the South, "ferreted them out," in "an obscure hole," "their only visible auxiliary a negro boy." But the paper founded under such inauspicious circumstances exerted a mighty in-

fluence, and lived to record not only President Lincoln's proclamation of emancipation, but the adoption of an amendment to the Constitution of the United States forever prohibiting slavery. It was the beginning and the nucleus of an agitation that eventually pervaded and filled every part of the country, and that baffled alike the wiles of politicians and parties, and the devices of those pulpits and ecclesiastical bodies which forgot that Jesus came to preach deliverance to the captives and the opening of the prison to them that are bound. Other newspapers were afterwards established upon the same principles; anti-slavery societies, founded upon the doctrine of immediate emancipation, sprang up on every hand; the agitation was carried into political parties, into the press, and into legislative and ecclesiastical assemblies; until, in 1860, the Southern States, taking alarm from the election of a President known to be at heart opposed to slavery though pledged to enforce all the constitutional safeguards of the system, seceded from the Union and set up a separate government. In the struggle that ensued slavery was abolished by an exercise of the powers of war, as a necessary means of restoring the Union.

Mr. Garrison sought the abolition of slavery by moral means alone. He knew that the National Government had no power over the system in any State, though it could abolish it at the National Capital, and prohibit it in the inchoate States called Territories. He thought it should, by the exercise of such limited powers as it possessed, bring its moral influence to bear in favor of abolition; but neither he nor his associates ever asked Congress to exercise any unconstitutional power. His idea was to combine the moral influence of the North, and pour it through every open channel upon the South. To this end he made his appeal to the Northern churches and pulpits, beseeching them to bring the power of Christianity to bear against the slave system, and to advocate the right of the slaves to immediate and unconditional freedom. He thought that, under the moral pressure thus created, and which would be re-enforced by the civilization and Christianity of the foremost nations of the world, the South would speedily give way and proclaim freedom to her bondmen. He was a man of peace, hating war not less than he did slavery; but he warned his countrymen that if they refused to

abolish slavery by moral power a retributive war must sooner or later ensue. The conflict was irrepressible. Slavery must be overthrown, if not by peaceful means, then in blood. The first society organized under Mr. Garrison's auspices, and in accordance with his principles, was the "New England Anti-Slavery Society," which adopted its Constitution in January, 1832. In the spring of this year Mr. Garrison issued his work entitled "Thoughts on African Colonization," in which he showed by ample citations from official documents that the American Colonization Society was organized in the interest of slavery, and that in offering itself to the people of the North as a practical remedy for that system it was guilty of deception. His book smote the Society with a paralysis from which it has never recovered. Agents of the American Colonization Society in England having succeeded in deceiving leading abolitionists there as to the character and tendency of that Society, Mr. Garrison was deputed by the New England Anti-Slavery Society to visit that country for the purpose of counteracting their influence. He went in the spring of 1833, when he was but twenty-seven years of age, and was received

with great cordiality by British abolitionists, some of whom had heard of his bold assaults upon American slavery, and seen a few numbers of "The Liberator." The struggle for emancipation in the West Indies was then at the point of culmination; the leaders of the cause, from all parts of the kingdom, were assembled in London, and Mr. Garrison was at once admitted to their councils and treated with distinguished consideration. He formed the acquaintance of Wilberforce, Clarkson, Buxton, O'Connell, George Thompson, and many others, and was greatly cheered by what he saw and heard. He was thoroughly successful in his efforts to undeceive the people of England in respect to the character and designs of the American Colonization Society, and took home with him a "Protest" against it, signed by Wilberforce, Zachary Macaulay, Samuel Gurney, William Evans, S. Lushington, T. Fowell Buxton, James Cropper, Daniel O'Connell, and others, in which they declared their deliberate judgment that "its precepts were delusive," and "its real effects of the most dangerous nature." He also received assurances of the cordial sympathy of British abolitionists with him in his efforts to

abolish American slavery. He gained a hearing before a large, popular assembly in London, and won the confidence of those whom he addressed by his evident earnestness, sincerity, and ability.

Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, before he had an opportunity of meeting him, invited him to breakfast at his house. Mr. Garrison presented himself at the appointed time; but Mr. Buxton, instead of coming forward promptly to take his hand, scrutinized him from head to foot, and then inquired, somewhat dubiously, "Have I the pleasure of addressing Mr. Garrison, of Boston, in the United States?" Being answered in the affirmative, he lifted up his hands and exclaimed, "Why, my dear sir, I thought you were a black man, and I have consequently invited this company of ladies and gentlemen to be present to welcome Mr. Garrison, the black advocate of emancipation, from the United States of America." Mr. Garrison often said that, of all the compliments he ever received, this was the only one that he cared to remember or repeat; for Mr. Buxton had somehow or other supposed that no white American could plead for those in bondage as he had

done, and that therefore he must be black. Mr. Garrison's visit to England enraged the pro-slavery people and press of the United States at the outset, and when he returned home in September, with the "Protest" against the Colonization Society, and announced that he had engaged the services of George Thompson as a lecturer against American slavery, there were fresh outbursts of rage on every hand. The American Anti-Slavery Society was organized in December of that year, putting forth a masterly declaration of its principles and purposes from the pen of Mr. Garrison. This added fresh fuel to the public excitement, and when Mr. Thompson came over in the next spring, the hostility to the cause began to manifest itself in mobs organized to suppress the discussion of the slavery question. Now began what Harriet Martineau called "the Martyr Age in America." Mr. Thompson gained a favorable hearing in a few places, but his appearance in any town or city became at length the signal of a mob, and in the fall of 1835 he was compelled, in order to save his life, to embark secretly for England. Just before his departure, the announcement that he would

address the Women's Anti-Slavery Society of Boston created "a mob of gentlemen of property and standing," from which, if he had been present, he could hardly have escaped with his life. The whole city was in an uproar. Mr. Garrison, almost denuded of his clothing, was dragged through the streets by infuriated men, with a rope around his body, by which they doubtless intended to hang him. He was rescued with great difficulty and consigned to the jail for safety, until he could be secretly removed from the city. For two or three years these attempts to suppress the anti-slavery movement by violence were persisted in, but it was like attempting to extinguish a fire by pouring oil upon the flames, or like an effort to stop the roar of Niagara by increasing the volume of its waters.

Anti-slavery societies were greatly multiplied throughout the North, and many men of influence, both in the Church and in the State, were won to the cause. Mr. Garrison, true to his original purpose, never faltered or turned back. Other friends of the cause were sometimes discouraged—he, never. The abolitionists of the United States were a united body until 1839-40

when divisions sprang up among them. Mr. Garrison countenanced the activity of women in the cause, even to the extent of allowing them to vote and speak in the anti-slavery societies, and appointing them as lecturing agents. To this a strong party was opposed upon social and religious grounds. Then there were some who thought Mr. Garrison dealt too severely with the churches and pulpits for their complicity with slavery, and who accused him of a want of religious orthodoxy. He was, moreover, a non-resistant, and this, to many, was distasteful. The dissentients from his opinions determined to form an anti-slavery political party, while he believed in working by moral rather than political party instrumentalities. These differences led to the organization of a new National Anti-Slavery Society, in 1840, and to the formation of the "Liberty Party" in politics. The two societies sent their delegates to the World's Anti-Slavery Convention, in London, in 1840, and Mr. Garrison refused to take his seat in that body, because the women delegates from the United States were excluded.

The discussions of the next few years served

to make clearer than before the practical workings of the Constitution of the United States as a shield and support of slavery; and Mr. Garrison, after long and painful reflection, came to the conclusion that its pro-slavery clauses were immoral, and that it was therefore wrong to take an oath for its support. The Southern States had a greatly enlarged representation in Congress on account of their slaves, and the National Government was constitutionally bound to assist in the capture of fugitive slaves, and to suppress every attempt on their part to gain their freedom by force. In view of these provisions, Mr. Garrison, adopting a bold Scriptural figure of speech, denounced the Union as "a covenant with death and an agreement with hell," and adopted as his motto the legend, "No union with slaveholders." His argument on this question, in the light of ethical principles generally admitted to be sound, could not easily be answered, and many men, who shrank from the conclusion that followed therefrom, were held by it as in a vise. His exposures of the character and practical working of the pro-slavery clauses of the Constitution, in spite of the impatience with which

they were regarded in some quarters, made a deep impression upon the national conscience, and served to abate that indiscriminating and idolatrous reverence for the Union, upon which the slave-holders had so long relied for the protection of their system.

One class of abolitionists sought to evade the difficulty by strained interpretations of the clauses referred to, while others, admitting that they were immoral, felt themselves obliged, notwithstanding, to support the Constitution in order to avoid what they thought would be still greater evils. The American Anti-Slavery Society, of which Mr. Garrison was the President from 1843 to the day of emancipation, was during all this period the nucleus of an intense and powerful moral agitation, which was greatly valued by the soundest and most faithful workers in the field of politics, who greatly respected him for his fidelity to his convictions. On the other hand, Mr. Garrison always had the highest respect for every earnest and faithful opponent of slavery, however far he might be from adopting his special views. He was intolerant of nothing but conscious treachery to the cause. When in 1861 the

Southern States seceded from the Union and took up arms against it, he saw clearly that slavery would perish in the struggle, that the Constitution would be purged of its pro-slavery clauses, and that the Union thenceforth, instead of being "a covenant with death and an agreement with hell," would rest upon the sure foundations of liberty, justice and equality to all men. He therefore ceased from that hour to advocate disunion, and devoted himself to the task of preparing the way for and hastening on the inevitable event. His services at this period were recognized and honored by President Lincoln and others in authority, and the whole country knew that the agitation which made the abolition of slavery feasible and necessary was due to his uncompromising spirit and indomitable courage. He lived to witness the redemption of his country from the curse of human bondage, not indeed by the means which he preferred, and which he hoped would prove sufficiently potent, but by the bloody arbitrament of war. None the less, however, did he see in the great event the hand of that Divine Providence in which he had always relied for support in the great strug-

gle to which his life was devoted. In 1865, at the close of the war, he declared that, slavery being abolished, his career as an abolitionist was ended. He counselled a dissolution of the American Anti-Slavery Society, insisting that it had become *functus officii*, and that whatever needed to be done for the protection of the freedmen could best be accomplished by new associations formed for that purpose. "The Liberator" was discontinued at the end of the same year, after an existence of thirty-five years. He visited England for the second time in 1846, and again in 1867, when he was received with distinguished honors, public as well as private. In 1877, when he was there for the last time, he declined every form of public recognition. He died in New York, May 24, 1879, in the 74th year of his age, and was buried in Boston, after a most impressive funeral service, May 28th. In 1843 a small volume of his "Sonnets and other Poems" was published, and in 1852 appeared a volume of "Selections" from his "Writings and Speeches." His wife, Helen Eliza Benson, died in 1876. Four sons and one daughter survive them.





